

**Postcolonial Burden, Leadership Tussle and Conflict
Resolution in Ahmed Yerima's *Tafida***

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Abstract

The leadership tussle in post-colonial Africa has traces to neo/colonial entrenchment and misdeeds, which constitute post-colonial burden to Africans and Africa. This paper is aimed at analysing Ahmed Yerima's *Tafida and Other Plays* to show how forgiveness and reconciliation are viable religious mechanisms for resolving intra- and inter-personal and -group conflicts and attaining peace within self and with others. The analysis, which involves qualitative method and text-content analytical techniques, shows that *Tafida*, the hero, loses his life to traitors involved in leadership tussle with him, but forgives his traitors and enemies and reconciles with himself. These deeds and his well-lived life of touching lives significantly across the nation earned for him the passage to

Al-Jena. The study concludes that citizens and leaders are bound to do well and duly develop their nations to any height once they practically and fully embrace peace, integrate, genuinely touch lives, forgive one another (their transgressors), and reconcile themselves deep within to make good relationships with God and fellow human beings. It calls on all and sundry to imbibe the teachings embodied in the text for the betterment of self, others and the society at large, as done by Tafida. The study is anchored on post-colonial theory, which explains experiences and deeds of formerly colonised peoples in Africa and elsewhere. The experiences and deeds ground their post-colonial burden and inherent leadership tussle.

Keywords: Postcolonial burden, Leadership tussle, Conflict resolution, *Tafida*, Forgiveness, Reconciliation

Introduction

The celebration of independence in Africa never lasted because within a while, the indigenous leaders and elites began to chastise the African masses much harder than the alien leaders and elite did. Regardless of all that, it is quite better that independence was got in various African nations. The retreating colonist was not bothered to entrench qualitative and transactional leadership in the dominions. Rather, their selfish interest was to enthrone willing cronies who were (and are still) never concerned with leading their people well but to ‘protect the interest of the metro-pole’ (195–6). Western Europe and North America had to sustain colonialism in Africa with neo-colonialism till date in order to continue to explore and exploit Africa across ages in chameleon disguise. Neo-colonialism has remained resilient,

indelible and intractable in Africa, as only ‘little things have changed’ (Vimercati 4).

African post-colonial conditions still raise serious worries for scholars and other individuals. They constitute what this paper calls postcolonial burden, the burden of ‘from fry pan to fire’. Instead of manning the affairs of their nations in favourable and worthwhile ways that would allow for rapid development and satisfactory governance to citizens, the post-colonial African leaders rather resort to leadership tussle. The tussle is informed by their desperation for power and wealth amassment from public treasuries entrusted on them. The ill motives behind the tussle manifest in forms of greed, corruption and failed leadership.

Given the foregoing, this paper seeks to explore Ahmed Yerima’s *Tafida* to show symbolic ways of resolving the leadership tussle, as a post-colonial burden, and of tackling other phases of the burden. The focus of this study is to explain how the postcolonial burden has remained a central contributor to the socio-political, socio-economic problems and other social woes of post-colonial African polity, focusing on the case of Nigeria.

Relevant Literature

Jennifer Umezina examines the nativisation of the English Language in Nigerian fiction using Yerima’s *Tafida*. She finds that the playwright focuses on the ‘close interplay between both intra-African and Western cultural conditions reflected in the play.’ Her finding is that Yerima uses such stylistic devices as semantic deviations, repetition, lexical matching,

and phonological deviation' to Africanise the language of the text and to emphasise the centrality of culture to our thought and belief pattern through the content of *Tafida*. The result of this kind of treatment of material by Yerima is that the beauty of the text goes beyond mere dramatic and linguistic success, 'there are living words by which the culture and tradition of the people of the Nigerian society are preserved for posterity' (1).

That is not to say the least that Yerima's works of art stretch beyond Nigeria to African discourse within and beyond the context of post-colonial literature. Julius Adeoye and Rantimi Jays opine that 'Yerima's socialist-realist leaning is evident in all his dramatic representations' (2). They affirm that Yerima creates a relevancy to modern Nigerian theatre in particular and African theatre and literature in general through his critical reflections on and treatment of contemporary social, political, economic, cultural and environment subject matters (Adeoye and Jays 2). Given the relevance he creates, it is imperative to undertake a study of this kind on his play *Tafida*. The play *Tafida and Other Plays* was first published in a programme pamphlet during one of the memorials of Shehu Musa Yar'Adua (Udengwu 8), who is the hero of the play. Its book length version was out of press in 2013. Considering his unique engagement with the themes prevalent in most of his works, Yerima's contribution to post-colonial discourse and literary decolonisation cannot be over-emphasised.

Claude Ake observes that 'the circumstances of African history conspired to produce an elite which could not function because it had no sense of identity or integrity and no

confidence, did not know where it was coming from or where it was going' (1212). For starters, the colonist settlers reified the indigenous people to see themselves as inferior and incapable of ethics and embody evil, as opposed to the Christian settlers who are forces of good (Fanon, 32). European incursion into and misdeeds in and to Africa are worsened by the Arabic/Islamic predatory entry into Africa. Ayi Kwei Arma calls the two invaders 'The Predators' and 'Destroyers' in his *Two Thousand Seasons*. Most post-colonial African leaders and their other elite fellows do not only thread the paths of the alien invaders and predators, but also do worse than the foreigners did. Yet, they still link up with or run to them in post-colonial times for political and economic games.

Fanon (32, 36, 47), Chinweizu (xiii – xiv, xxi, 3, 97–100), and Rodney (36 – 54) all show how traditional African elite were weakened while the bourgeois/western-mentored or minded intellectual elite took the centre-stage. Walter Rodney regrets that 'the wealth created by African labour and from African resources was grabbed by the capitalist countries of Europe (and the US)' (43). The question of how to reclaim the snapped away yields of the African labour and resources is a post-colonial burden. Rodney further states that additional to the grabbing were the placed restrictions on African capability, meant to allow for maximal harnessing of its economic potentials, the base of development (43). Clearly, by so doing, Africa is stripped of its development (potentials) and deliberately impoverished and incapacitated by the colonialists and neo-colonialists.

Upon invasion, the colonialists began their game with class division into: the native worker valued by the colonist for their almost free labour; the colonised intellectual, who are recruited by the settler to act as spokespersons for their views; and the lumpen proletariat, being the third group (Fanon 46). With the division, they introduced the indirect rule system. Next, the colonialists routinely brainwashed the natives and polluted their minds against their indigenous systems, which they dabbled variously and made inferior (Fanon 36). Meanwhile, just as Azikiwe notes, anthropologically, no race is superior or inferior to another (117). Indoctrination of the natives followed suit. They continuously imposed their systems and ways of life on Africans and plundered all that is good in the land they had invaded. At last, they succeeded in becoming lords over the natives in their own homeland (47). The colonialists were concerned with the acquisition of power, which they achieved through violence.

That political culture of violence had been imbibed since the independence by African indigenous leaders (Ake 1213), such as those Nigeria has today that use violence rather than legitimate electoral processes to acquire elective positions. The colonialists determined the tenor and the texture of African post-independence political leadership. Even these days in the post-colonial era, they still do so in mute from afar, not necessarily by staying in Africa to do so. The workings of colonial culture are still with us. For example, Gabon gained independence from France in 1960, and soon after, the then new President of Gabon, Leon Mba, once remarked viz: 'Gabon is independent but between Gabon and France, nothing has changed, everything goes on as before' (Fanon 52). African States still remain spheres of influence of former colonial masterminds. This line of thinking is well expounded

in M'bedy's argument that 'the European concept of State has had a strong influence on African countries,' implicating this state of affairs as 'what led to the drawing of arbitrary borders throughout Africa' (10).

Political repression which dogged and still dogs African political and administrative practice, and human rights violation are legacies of colonisation and a manifestation of bad governance. M'bedy maintains that 'colonial rule was the anti-thesis of democracy because it was premised on the usurpation of fundamental rights of self-determination and of the fundamental human rights of citizens and peoples (11). M'bedy's position tallies extensively with those of Mokwugwo Okoye and Claude Ake. Okoye argues that:

Whatever legitimacy colonialism possessed was derived not from any set of agreed rules and consensus, but from the monopoly of the means of coercion and violence, and by its divide-and-rule strategies, aimed at intensifying the cleavages (class tribal, religious) inherent in the social structure and at prolonging its rule (23).

As Chinweizu agrees, the trend in elitist and leadership self-effacement found in Francophile African countries also define elite relations with the colonists in the Anglophile Africa situations (95). Nnamdi Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo typify this line of thinking and attitude (Chinweizu 64, 95–96). Chinweizu reports that these men who saw themselves as the group with special rights and obligations to lead, and who later mobilised the masses to gain power, were regrettably not committed to mass or populist nationalism, because 'they quickly abandoned the masses to disillusionment' upon

attaining independence (Chinweizu 96). Put simply, the intellectual elite became facile and merely danced to the order of things as dictated by the imperialists. As Chinweizu rightly recalls, the Nigerian Youth Movement of the 1930s advocated political autonomy within rather than outside the British Empire (97).

Also, the post Casey-Hayford crop of petit-bourgeois elite saw in liberal capitalism their opportunity to economically buttress their elite pretensions (Chinweizu 97). The agenda of the movement for independence changed soon afterwards, when independence was attained at last. It was at that point in time that the hidden agenda of Nigerian nationalists became known, as their elitist deeds posed questions to truism of their anti-colonialism and nationalism (Chinweizu 98). Despite claiming to be fighting colonialism, the new crop of Nigerian elite taking charge of the indigenous leadership of the new independent nation regarded the entrenchment of liberal capitalist democracy as an end far more important than the liberation of Africa from imperialist connections (97).

The vulture of neocolonialism subsists and persists in the configuration of Africa's daunting problems of the contemporary era. Post-coloniality is highly engaged with colonialism. This point, Thomas holds, as he states that there is emptiness at present in which such a confident silence can be heard' about having moved pass 'colonial images and narratives' (195). The thinking that colonialism is still sustained in different form(s) is echoed by As Fonkeng viz: 'any thinking which trivializes the colonial factor as irrelevant today is flawed' (2). Colonial and neo-colonial processes are undoubtedly behind the persistent and resurfacing post-colonial issues confronting Africa in the post-colonial era.

These include the recurrent violent conflict in Western Sudan, and the British Cameroons (Bakassi Peninsula/Ambazonia); Boko Haram, armed banditry and herder terrorism, unknown gunmen terrorism, Biafran secessionist agitation in Nigeria; the Al-Shabaab terrorism and the Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP) in Kenya, Somalia and Mali; and so on.

Theoretical Framework

This study is rooted in Postcolonial Theory (PT hereafter). All the issues arising from the experience of colonialism and neo-colonial structures adumbrated above are within the discursive purview of Postcolonial Theory. Quayson describes PT as what studies the experience of colonialism and its past and present effects, both at the local level of ex-colonial societies and at the level of more general global developments that are considered to be the aftermath effects of empire' (2). The theory examines colonial and neo-colonial literature in order to 'unearth the ethnocentrism, imperialism, and discourses of domination deployed by the colonizing powers' (Otu and Nwachukwu 557). It is a framework for responding to what had been said and done by the colonialists against the colonized. PT also looks at contemporary socioeconomic, political and cultural developments in their ex-colonies in relations with the former colonizers (Otu and Nwachukwu 557).

As a framework, PT re-examines social, economic and political structures implanted by the ex-colonialists in order to hold fast the formerly colonized and their territories and resources. Rather than being merely the writing that rose after colonialism, postcolonial literature (PL hereafter) critically scrutinizes the colonial relations of power in relation to what

obtains after colonialism. It resists colonialist perspectives and equally implicates same on the subsisting travails of the post-colony. PT offers people of ex-colonies the intellectual avenue for reinventing their history from their own worldview, in order to promote their nationalism and cultural identity, and recall alternative narratives other than the ones foisted on them by the erstwhile colonists. It brings to fore the people's cultural harvests in the global sphere what 'mankind will be all the richer for the variety and distinctiveness of the offering' (Achebe 68).

Therefore, PT, as the nucleus of postcolonial literature, is marked by experiences of cultural exclusion and division under Empire (Boehmer 3). As Otu and Nwachukwu (558) and Mbembe (40) assert, due to the reification of colonial legacies and structures on African continent and the psyche of the African, 'relations of subjection' were 'introduced and consolidated'. PT has several strands, as its broad concerns revolve around manifestations of colonialism and neo-colonialism respectively. Here, the strands would not be engaged with beyond the mere mention of them. Given the concerns, the postulations and the unfading relevance of PT as well as PL, our textual analysis shall rely on PT for theoretical grounding. This is because the text is not only a post-colonial literature, but also one built on and drawing insights from PT.

Textual Analysis

The first part of this data analysis shall be a wholesome brief on or narrative of the text under study. Accordingly, the play opens with the body of Tafida wrapped ready for burial, with an Imam and a gathered congregation in toe. As they do their duty by the dead and leave, Tafida's corpse is presently

approached and woken up by Mutawalli, a supposed spirit of Tafida's father, who is the evident escort that would lead him to the next stage preparatory for Al-Jena. In a series of questions and answers, nostalgic recalls and flashbacks, reminiscences and reminders, the twosome reveal much of the important parts and characterizing features of their earthly lives. One talks from the patronizing vantage point of a proud, principled, rich and influential but Spartan and austere father. The other speaks from the vantage point of a privileged, high-flying, and accomplished son-turned statesman.

In the conversation and cross-examination with Mutawalli, Tafida reveals how much he was a chip of the old block, praising Mutawalli for his providential stay as well as his principled lifestyle which ended up rubbing off on his children, Tafida inclusive. He details how he joined the army because children of few other highly influential northerners joined; the influence of the Sarduana in the making of the new northern elite; and how his infantry experience in the Nigerian Army helped him to fight a successful Civil War that engulfed the Nigerian state at her infant Independence. Tafida chronicles how he took over power alongside Obasanjo after Multara's death, and how he and his boss kept faith with the Nigerian nation by honouring their words and returning the country to civil rule. He further details the circumstances surrounding his return to enthrone order and good leadership in politics, as a civilian in search of power. He speaks of his successes, the intrigues of his political friends who equally wanted power, the tussle and power-play that eventually led to his own liquidation and the consequent bitterness and regret that attended his untimely demise.

Tafida sums up that his return to power was necessitated by the fact that things were not going right in the polity and he expresses bitterness that his supposed friends not only betrayed and killed him, even though there was no justification for his forced exit. Although he took solace in the fact that he touched lives, he is sorely embittered and almost unforgiving regarding the circumstances of his untimely exit. However, reminded by Mutawalli of the fact that reconciliation, forgiveness and restitution are requisite for moral rectitude, which is a prerequisite condition for moving on to the next best stage/gate, after life, Tafida chooses to forgive his traducers. Thus, he moves with his conductor to the next stage with free conscience and lightness of heart, mind and spirit. This is point of the literary events highlights Yerima's displayed conflict resolution mechanism for both the living and the dead-on transition to where is believed accommodated only those who are chaste and forgiving.

Having done the first part of the textual analysis, we now move on to analyzing the text within the confine of post-colonial burden, leadership tussle and conflict resolution in Ahmed Yerima's *Tafida*. It is imperative to note here that the official colonialist educationist and misleading Westernized socialization of the African elite led to poor leadership, political instability, power tussle, and economic strangulation on the continent since the attainment of independence from colonial rule. These have been made possible through Neo-colonial and Neo-imperialist economic and political policies. These are evidenced in Yerima's *Tafida*. To prepare himself for leadership in the emerging country, Tafida joins the army at the officer cadre. There was a combination of subtle ambition to rule the new nation and peer-influence of some equally elitist families.

Mutawalli recalls that Tafida desired to join the army because he ‘saw the children of Muhammadu Ribadu wanting to join the army,’ and wondered ‘why was Shehu looking at the stomach of his neighbours to measure his hunger’ (Yerima 16–17). As Tafida makes a facetious claim to love for the *khaki*, as a primary reason for joining the Army, Matawalli, acclaimed for being truthful, reminds him viz:

...But that night you told me that it was because the Sarduana had called on the northern Big families to send a son each into the army. I had heard that, too, so I believed you. But you know I had wanted you to become a lawyer, or a treasurer (Yerima 19).

By relating in a nostalgic manner, how he and a few other privileged northern Nigerian elite joined the officer cadre of the Nigerian Army, Tafida, and by extension, the author gives background to the scramble to dominate the strategic arms of the Nigerian enterprise by various elitist vested interests in the waning days of colonialism. This scramble under cut-throat regional competitions and rivalries was encouraged and supervised by the retreating colonialists, who sowed dissension, hatred and nepotism in the polity of the nation they created by amalgamation and called ‘Nigeria’. The colonialists favoured the northerners much more than the southerners, because of the administrative convenience they enjoyed more in the North. Whoever was found to be more loyal and steadfast to the course of the British grand plan was given preference over the rest. That is the root of the unreserved place of the Sarduana in Nigerian polity and the remote foundation of the Hausa-Fulani political hegemony in Nigeria since independence.

The disillusion occasioned by cosmetic or plastic independence, evidenced in poor leadership, soon gave rise to the futuristic soldiers to ply their trade in the struggle to gain and keep power always, as the vassal of the supervening Neo-colonialists. There is a subtle recall of the pre-war tensions and politicking. Mutawalli recalls: ‘when the Sarduana coup came, you were in Enugu right at the heart of the matter. You had just started your life, then. I was very worried. Not a word from you, not a word’ (Yerima18). The resultant Civil War would offer privilege of power and stay to the victorious segment of the Armed Forces over the rest of the country. This segment would continually determine the tenor and the tone of the country’s politics and the consequent economic stagnation that must follow. Tafida boasts of his exploits in the Civil War thus: ‘The Civil War was full of action, never a dull moment. It was like a chessboard. You have your troops and I have mine, and each of us trying to outdo the other’ (18). This boast, coupled with the other typical one: ‘I took an active part in the Civil War to maintain Nigeria as a united country’ (Yerima 24), serves as the excuse and the locus to corner privilege, pillage the collective coffers and enthrone mediocrity.

This typical statement has been mouthed exactly the same way on numerous frivolous as well as serious occasions by such national characters on the Nigerian scene as not only the real- life Shehu Musa Yar’Adua, but more notoriously the likes of Olusegun Obasanjo, Muhammadu Buhari, Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha. It often serves as an invocation of a cultic order of vainglorious appeal that bestows unmerited favour and uncharitable licence to rule without scruples, and to leadership bereft of sobriety. Interestingly, not one of the boastful ‘victorious’ ex-soldiers ever mention

the Neo-colonial factor in the prosecution and determination of victory in the Civil War. Meanwhile, the war gives Tafida the leverage to join the ruling military elite. His team makes good for itself, and returns power to civilians. On retirement at barely 38, Tafida has loads of money and initiates large-scale shipping business. Quite shocking enough, he does not say how he came about such huge sums that he used to establish such a large shipping company and other businesses. His feats make Mutawalli to marvel repeatedly.

In fact, Tafida's feats at that age undoubtedly trigger anxiety in every concerned person or a concerned parent like Mutawalli. The words of Mutawalli about Tafida's sudden unexplained wealth and business feats read: 'That was the day I became really scared and worried about you. You were young. Thirty-eight, I think' (Yerima 19). Mutawalli might probably say to himself: '*You had lived a full life. What were you going to do with the rest of your adult life?*' In any case, the enthroned democracy is truncated by another clique of erstwhile Civil War gallants who would equally remind us of their war scars. Tafida returns to politics to salvage a nation that he had given so much blood to unite. His excuse for returning is: 'we left power in 1979, hoping that Nigeria would grow. If it had grown from where we left, what would I be doing in the sun, going round the country seeking a mandate to rule?' (Yerima 24). He condemned the coup planners and executors, stressing that the people should have been allowed to vote out bad leaders.

While in politics, Tafida's peers feared him for the great amounts of money he had, with which he could buy votes. That reality indicates that claims about corrective leadership were mere façade, pretense, and smokescreen to cover up or

decorate his quest for power to seem otherwise. Influenced by his attained feats, he is too confident. His words reveal this assertion thus: ‘Always, I would tell my associates that if they found anybody better than me, I was ready to step down’ (Yerima 22). It is the intrigues and counter intrigues attending political participation that led inexorably to Tafida’s liquidation through incarceration in the most inhuman of prison conditions. He had won a landslide in SDP primaries for the presidential ticket, but his friend, whom Mutawalli had all along distrusted, cancelled the elections and thereby invited counter intrigues and political subterfuge from Tafida and his associates. Thus, although he claims his politics was not ‘do or die,’ ironically his friendly enemies saw it as such and played against the rules, for which Tafida is disconsolate and initially unforgiving until when he is left with forgiveness option or self-denial of further passage to Al-Jena.

There is a belief in Islam that a known spirit goes to guide and direct aright a dead person to the final destination. The spirit helps the dead person in the transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead’ (Udengwu13). This implies that the known spirit could help the newly dead person to reconcile himself with his present reality, as a dead person who no longer has human powers, but is now at the mercy of Allah – or the essences– and must behave well to gain admittance to Al-Jena. This is where conflict resolution in the studied text garners energy and takes root. Like Mutawalli does to Tafida, Yerima quite rightly holds both his advertised presidential audience and us (the readership audience) spell-bound. This assertion is captured in the studied text thus:

It was wonderful because everybody was so scared
that I have that power. The president was seated,

everybody was seated and you could hear a pin drop. It was nice to know that they could be scared of death. The play reminded them that the day of judgement will come, and there was the need for them to begin to examine what they were doing (Yerima14).

From the above, it could be understood that the burdens of life in general, as in post-colonial burden, and those of the leadership tussle in particular undoubtedly filled the minds of the leaders present at the above noted scene. Those were what got them tensed up the most. At that point too, they began to introspect and retrospect deeply on the conflict they had to let go in order to gain passage to Al-Jena at death. Other persons present there has their own varied thoughts too. The readers, including this researcher, are undoubtedly touched by the text too, particularly at the point of conflict resolution. This conflict resolution is not just for the dead or until at death, but also a literary insight to or an ignition of conflict resolution within self and then with others, one's traitors and adversaries.

Therefore, as portrayed in the text, Yerima scores a metaphoric bull's eye in proffering solution to the problem of political leadership in post-colonial Africa. That is regardless of offering his conflict resolution from religious perspective, precisely from the angle of Islamic religion. The escorting spirit has a supervening influence and replaces the Neo-colonialist in the world of the second stage, the stage of death. Mutawalli, the supervening spirit, is indigenous, not expatriate/Neo-colonialist. He helps Tafida to reconcile and forgive the hateful events surrounding his untimely death. By so doing, he purifies his soul. This presents a great lesson to us all, believers and non-believers alike.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Yerima presents reconciliation and forgiveness as the surest ways for the attainment of our collective Al-Jena. It is in itself a metaphoric rendition of the imperatives for an egalitarian society. Touching lives should be more geared towards national lives rather than only individuals close to one. Tafida takes solace in how well he lived by touching lives, letting go the ills meted out on him in the course of leadership tussle, which include sending him away from the Earth before the Master's predetermined time of his demise from the Mother Earth. It is quite obvious that Tafida reconciles and forgives and thereby has no hinge to his passage to Al-Jena. While alive, he did the much he could to impact on lives, and at the point of transition, he forgives those he is yet to forgive. So, in spite of the untimely nature of death, and the attendant bitterness resulting from the nostalgia of attenuated dreams, Tafida remains fulfilled by virtue of his worthwhile deeds and virtuous living, as a good citizen and leader. Indeed, he sets pace for national healing and resolution of conflict with self and others, which is the peak of post-colonial burden and the lead characteristic of leadership tussle in post-colonial Africa, as obtained the highest in Nigeria.

Both holy persons and sinners should embrace peace, for this is the road to true development and happiness, and even spiritual growth. Mutawalli continually urges Tafida to forgive and forget. This message also applies to the living. If leaders in Nigeria and other parts of the globe do so, there would be no political tussle, characterized by violent conflict, betrayal, elimination of opponents, etc. The forgiving religious faithful of any religion, who is truly religious, would always forgive and let peace be within self and with others.

This is accentuated by the requirements of service to humanity, not merely to the self, a requirement sorely needed by the embattled children of the post-colony. The dominating and pervasive mantra is: ‘did you touch lives while you were there?’ Tafida is sure that he did, and that in itself is a fulfillment of noble life’s journey.

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